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Two Victorian Ladies in Bosnia, 1862-1875: G.M. MacKenzie and A.P. Irby

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Petar Petrović Njegoš once told a group of English officers about a visit paid him by two English travelers in 1843. One of these was a woman. They had come to Cetinje after a hard climb through enemy ranks to see the Montenegrin ruler and poet. Asked by Njegoš what made her undertake such an arduous and perilous journey, the woman replied: "Curiosity... I am an Englishwoman." [1] One wonders, not knowing all the circumstances of that particular visit nor the personalities of the travelers, whether this was an overstatement or an understatement.

Two English women travelers a generation later, Georgina Muir MacKenzie and Adeline Paulina Irby, when they set off on their Balkan journeys which included Bosnia and Hercegovina, similarly did not lack curiosity – nor some other things. They had good education, good connections, and were financially secure. Their Balkan experience was described in several texts which appeared between 1861 and 1877. Interestingly enough, Bosnia and Hercegovina, which were to become central to A.P. Irby's life, did not figure prominently in their writings of the 1860's. It was only in the fourth edition (or second, for all practical purposes) of their book *Travels in the Slavonic Provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, published in 1877, when G.M. MacKenzie had been dead for some years, that Bosnia had been given fuller treatment.

The first edition of the book, which came out in 1866, describes only one of their journeys, that of 1863, when the two women toured northern Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo, northern Albania, and Montenegro. However, some scattered references to Bosnia and Hercegovina and the trip from Belgrade to Dubrovnik via Sarajevo and Mostar they undertook the year before, in 1862, can be found there. Similarly, there is some scanty information on these provinces in their earlier book on the Balkans entitled *Notes on the South Slavonic Countries in Austria and Turkey in Europe*. That booklet, published anonymously in 1865, contained the material presented by Georgina Muir MacKenzie in a lecture in Bath the previous year. The editor and writer of its preface was Humphry Sandwith, a doctor who had travelled in the Balkans and Turkey and was a strong supporter of Slavic peoples. Georgina and Paulina did not want to put their names as authors of the book for obvious reasons – they were women, and young women at that, and felt they could not match a man's knowledge of the area. It is no wonder, then, that at the beginning of the book they "beg to submit

to those who may be interested on the subject the following notes." [2] The young ladies' first travel book, *Across the Carpathians* (1862), was also published anonymously. (The unnamed author turns out to be a woman who says she was travelling with her aunt.) In much the same style, Georgina's and Paulina's article on Montenegro, which appeared in the collection *Vacation Tourists and Notes of Travels*, in 1861 (1862), was signed by an enigmatic "I.M." The authoress was again accompanied by her "aunt."

This authorial self-effacement was discontinued by their *Travels*, which carried Georgina's and Paulina's full names on its title page. But Victorian feminine humbleness in intellectual matters was repeatedly expressed in their "Introduction" to the book, notwithstanding the fact that this modesty was not necessary. Nor was it a mere accident that Paulina Irby should have asked such a man as W.E. Gladstone to write a preface for the 1877 edition. Just as she was desirous of the masculine stamp of approval for Georgina's and her political judgments, so Gladstone, on his part, wished to emphasize the significance of their characteristically feminine account of the Slavic parts of Turkey. Having praised the superior quality of the general information they provided ("no diplomatist, no consul, no traveller, among our countrymen, has made such a valuable contribution to our means of knowledge in this important matter"), [3] he pointed out, with typical period pathos, their accurate and poignant description of the life of Christian womanhood in the Balkans, "a life in which wife and daughter, the appointed sources of the sweetest consolation, were the standing occasions of the sharpest anxiety." [4]

This objectivity in portraying Serbian and other south Slavic women was acknowledged with gratitude by Čedomilj Mijatović, the Serbo-Croatian translator of *Travels*, which came out in Belgrade just two years after its publication in England. Unlike most earlier travelers, who had dealt only with the "male half of [the south Slavic] society," Miss Muir Mackenzie and Miss Irby now provided a good depiction of its "female half," a depiction enriched with a "feminine perspective." [5]

The ladies' "feminine perspective" colors, naturally, their entire work, as it did their actual contacts with the south Slavic people and Turkish officials while they were pursuing such a "masculine" business as traveling in the mid-nineteenth century Balkans, where there were few roads and where, especially in Bosnia, people traveled mostly on horseback or on foot. However much Georgina, the principal author of the two of *Travels* (observes Dorothy Anderson in her excellent book *Miss Irby and Her Friends*),

> in writing their saga, might discount the evidence of their sex, it is obvious throughout that the fact that they were women had much to do with the way their journeys went; and that both women enjoyed their distinctive position. It was, to put it bluntly, much more exciting and much more gratifying to be two Englishwomen in the wilds of Turkey than to be at home in England, or attending a German spa, or making an Italian cultural tour. They had their independence and they had their achievements; they had won esteem, even some notoriety; they had faced

> up to dangers and discomforts and had enjoyed overcoming both. [6]

In a sense, Georgina and Paulina in the 1860's, and Paulina and her new friend Priscilla Johnston in the 1870's, were at the same time more immune and more vulnerable as women travelers in the Balkans than were their male counterparts. They were well prepared for traveling and well equipped with necessities: they even carried with them such items of women's paraphernalia as a zinc-lined bathtub that could also be used as a table. They were furnished with powerful Turkish passports, the *bujurdi* and the *firman*, and with various letters of recommendation from one Christian family to another, so they could usually count on the best lodging available. But they had to spend long hours in the saddle, exposed to all kinds of weather, and frequently had to sleep at *khans*, which were sometimes little more than ordinary stables. (They took their own bedding with them and usually ordered cushions, carpets and mats to be taken out of the rooms before or upon their arrival. Sometimes, in limiting hygienic situations, they even pitched their tent inside *khans*). And the armed escorts that accompanied them were not always reliable.

Whereas *Notes on the South Slavonic Provinces in Austria and Turkey-in-Europe* devoted only a few pages to Bosnia and Hercegovina (mention of a bey who insists that all South Slavs speak the "Bosnian tongue", [7] brief description of roads and the guide-book-style information on the cities of Sarajevo and Mostar), and whereas the first edition of Travels subsumes the region under general considerations of Balkan history, geography, and politics, the 1877 edition of this book included a vivid record of Paulina's and Priscilla's experience during their trip from the Austrian frontier to Sarajevo and back, and of the political situation following the outbreak of the Christian rebellion of 1875.

Paulina Irby, the sole writer of these three Bosnian chapters, expressed at the outset her attitude toward the Turkish rule over a country in which she had not become a part-time resident. (Her school for Serbian girls in Sarajevo was established in 1870.) The country was miserably poor after centuries of foreign domination, and the Turkish yoke lay heavily on the Christian population. The Muslim element, though disliking the Osmanlis, oppressed and exploited the Christian *rayahs* and held them in contempt. But the Muslim masters of the country, those "offspring of an alliance between feudalism and Islam," [8] who used to be powerful guardians of Turkish western frontiers, were now a decaying, corrupt and fanatical class. "The Bosnian Beg par excellence… is a chained monster with drawn teeth and cut claws." [9] In the political near- anarchy created by the Bosnian-Herzegovinian uprising, passions were let loose and the position of Christian peasantry was more precarious than ever. There was arbitrary violence and killing on all sides, and the *rayahs* were frequently the victims of Muslim vindictiveness. That was the Bosnian situation which Paulina and Priscilla witnessed or heard about after they had reached Brod on one of the Sava steamers in August of 1875. Paulina did not conceal her sympathy for the Bosnian Christians, especially the Serbs, whose age-long suffering under the Turks came to epitomize for her a most tragic historical destiny, a destiny that could now take a different, more propitious turn. In the years to follow she did everything she could to help them and

tried in every way to identify with them.

Traveling across Bosnia in such disturbing and uncertain times presented itself as a more formidable task than ever. But the English ladies were resolved to get to Sarajevo and join their schoolgirls. Paulina was by nature strong-willed, proud and obstinate, and these characteristics certainly served her well during their trip.

Being English and being women – or vice versa – largely determined their way of seeing and of being seen. As women, Paulina and Priscilla could easily come in touch with Christian women (sometimes also Muslim), and they had access to their houses and their family life. Paulina cites, for example, a Bosnian woman, apparently from Sarajevo, who told her about the change which had taken place in the country during the previous decades, including the changes in the lives of Orthodox women in the city. [10] In Bosanska Gradiška ("Turkish Gradishka") Paulina and Priscilla were taken to the house of a Christian merchant and talked with his wife who served them "coffee and sweetmeats." [11] In Banja Luka, the next day they again visited another Christian family and not only learned the latest about the political situation there but also that the daughters of that family "were beautiful girls" who "had been educated by governesses from Austria and are now married to Serb merchants, living in Belgrade." [12] From this family the English ladies also heard stories of Christian girls being kidnapped by Muslims in the vicinity of Banja Luka. And while in Sarajevo, they were informed that the wife of the Austrian consul was about to leave the now unsafe town, with her little boy, "on the excuse of the illness of her mother." [13]

Paulina's and Priscilla's women's eyes did not fail to notice other "human interest" details, such as the food that was the typical fare of the Bosnian peasant ("the coarsest black bread, boiled beans, and maize"), [14] the contents of shops in the Gradiška bazaar, the interior of the *khans* by the wayside, or the looks of one of their drivers during their return journey from Sarajevo:

> This boy was after the worst type of Bosnian Mussulmans. He was lank and small, with colourless eyes; wisps of sandy hair escaped from the red handkerchief which was tied round a dirty white linen cap; his weazened boy's face was old with an expression of mingled cruelty, rapacity, and cunning. [15]

This description, with its possible subconscious meanings, could hardly have originated from the pen of a male traveler. Another incident, though of a different kind, reveals also Paulina's and Priscilla's feminine vulnerability. It was a situation that, again, a "Frank" (i.e. Western European) male traveler could probably not have experienced: while staying overnight at the *khan* in Kiseljak, the Englishwomen were awakened by bigoted Muslim women who were throwing charcoal through the window of their room. [16]

But because they were women, and because they were English, they could also feel

and show a degree of superiority and courage that helped them pass through the Bosnian confusion in the summer of 1875. Thus they got rid of a *zaptie* (policeman) in Banja Luka who came to tell them to report immediately to the Turkish authorities there by answering that they were "English ladies, and should do no such thing." [17] Moreover, showing their passports, they ordered him to go to the local governor at once, with the message that he supply them with an escort for their journey the following day. [18] Sometimes, their feminine boldness – and Englishness combined with their warm feeling for the Christian Slav cause, was basis for misunderstanding or even humorous situations, as when they heard, while on the Sava steamer, that insurrection had started in Bosnia. The news was told them by their friend Vaso Vidević, who, "pale as death," and with tears in his eyes, implored them not to go to Sarajevo. "We told him, encouragingly," writes Paulina, "it might prove a very good thing for their cause of two English ladies were killed. To which he replied, 'Yes; but not you.'" [19]

Paulina Irby's complete identification with Bosnia and its Christian population, to whom she was to devote her whole life's work–truly an errand into the educational wilderness–was not possible. She had enough pity and understanding and she possessed sound political judgment concerning the Balkans for her time, advocating freedom and independence for southern Slavs and even disagreeing with mainline British policy towards "European Turkey." But her native culture was worlds apart from what she found in her adopted country and her Englishness asserted itself time and again in various ways. Bosnia was a "rude land" [20] for her "the most barbarious of the provinces of Turkey in Europe," in which one felt like being "in the wilds of Asia." [21] (This echoes Georgina's earlier statement, from *Notes*, on the South Slavic countries as being as distant from the minds of Englishmen as if they were in "the interior of Tartary or the centre of Africa"). [22] The whole province, wrote Paulina, did not even have a book shop, "excepting the depot of the British and Foreign Bible Society in Sarajevo which has been established for about eight or ten years." [23] And the town of Gradiška, for instance, struck her as a veritable cultural frontier between East and West, the last "line of the Asiatic encroachments into Europe." [24]

Paulina Irby traveled to Bosnia with English travel guide-books, *Murray's Handbook for Travellers in Turkey*, and Bradshaw's *Continental Guide*, which basically offered advice to West Europeans regarding Turkish travel conditions and Oriental ways generally. Sometimes these guide-books reflected not only English culture but also British commercial and political interests: Bradshaw's *Guide*, for instance, traced the projected railway across the Balkans and further to the East–a railway which has never been completed. Paulina Irby mentioned it as an important line of communication which "may some day become our main highway to India." [25] Her sympathy for the Southern Slavs, especially the Serbs, certainly did not exclude something of a patronizing attitude towards these "younger children of the European family," as she calls them. [26] The best hope for the Balkan nations, she was saying or implying, lay not only in retaining their cultural and religious identity and in winning their political independence, but also in their full reintegration into the European

world. Symbolically, the European costume on the Bosnian girls from her Sarajevo school whom she was taking to Prague gave them a kind of political and cultural immunity and a safe passage out of the country at the frontier in Brod. Their crossing of the Sava, in Paulina's description meant much more than reaching another bank of a river. It was a change of civilizations: "A peal of bells from the church in Austrian Broad sounded more cheerily than ever across the water, while we were waiting for the ferry-boat in a golden breath of evening sunlight." [27]

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Notes

1. (Anonim), "S Njegošem na bojnom polju". Beleške jednog engleskog putnika (1843). *Politika* (Beograd), 18. septembra 1925, XXII, 6250, str. 3. ↩
2. Humphry Sandwith, ed., *Notes on the Slavonic Countries in Austria and Turkey in Europe*. William Blackwood, Edinburgh and London, 1865, p. 25. ↩
3. G. Muir Mackenzie and A. P. Irby, *Travels in the Slavonic Provinces of Turkey-in-Europe*, Daldy, Isbister, London, 1877, "Preface", p. ix. ↩
4. Ibid., p. xiii. ↩
5. G. Mjuir Makenzi i A. P. Irbi, *Putovanje po slovenskim zemljama Turske u Evropi*. Državna štamparija, Beograd, 1868, preveo Čedomilj Mijatović, "Predgovor prevodiočev", no pagination. ↩
6. Dorothy Anderson, *Miss Irby and Her Friends*, London, Hutchinson, 1966, p. 39. ↩
7. *Notes*, p. 24. ↩
8. G. M. Mackenzie and A. P. Irby, *Travels*, p. 6. ↩
9. *Ibid*., p. 8. ↩
10. *Ibid*., pp. 13-14. ↩
11. *Ibid*., p. 25. ↩
12. *Ibid*., p. 26. ↩
13. *Ibid*., p. 31. ↩
14. *Ibid*., p. 27. ↩
15. *Ibid*., p. 33. ↩
16. *Ibid*., p. 31. ↩
17. *Ibid*., p. 27. ↩
18. *Ibid*., p. 27. ↩
19. *Ibid*., p. 30. ↩
20. *Ibid*., p. 3. ↩
21. *Ibid*., p. 1. ↩
22. H. Sandwith, ed., *Notes*, p. 25. ↩
23. *Travels*, p. 19. ↩
24. *Ibid*., p. 25. ↩
25. *Ibid*., p. 3. ↩
26. *Ibid*., p. 6. ↩

27. *Ibid*., p. 34. ↩

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